

Dictators of discourse: Eurasian autocracies and the international battle of ideas

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In: Adam Hug (ed) *The Information Battle: How Governments in the former Soviet Union Promote their Agendas and Attack their Opponents Abroad*, Foreign Policy Centre, March 2017.

March 21, 2017



Authoritarian states have always sought to control information and manipulate the message. Historically, they relied on the blunt instruments of censorship and propaganda. Modern authoritarians still imprison journalists and close down newspapers, but they have also found more sophisticated ways to suppress criticism and skew narratives in their favour. Governments still need to control information at home, but they are also engaged in an information battle internationally. They use Western PR companies, government-backed NGOs and think-tanks, pliant or supportive academics and politicians, and interventions on social media to suppress critics and legitimise their regimes.

Russia has been most active in the information battle, and its goals and aims are far more ambitious than many other post-Soviet states. President Putin has called on staff in government-funded Russian media to “break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon media.”^[1] Journalists are seen to be on the frontline of an ‘information war’, part of a broader pattern of geopolitical competition. The Russian government has funded an array of news agencies and NGOs that promote a Kremlin-funded line. The news agency Sputnik, launched in 2014, was designed, according to its head Dmitry Kiselev, to fight ‘against aggressive propaganda that is now being fed to the world and which forces a unipolar construction of the world’.^[2] Information takes a prominent place in Russia’s National Security Strategy, in which Moscow outlines a struggle for global dominance, in which ‘information mechanisms’ play a central role.^[3]

Other authoritarian states in Eurasia use some of Russia’s templates for controlling information and promoting alternative narratives, but they are less concerned with global geopolitics and more worried about defending their own regimes from domestic and international criticism. Across Eurasia, nervous autocrats have cracked down hard on independent journalists, bloggers and media outlets over the last decade. Freedom House rates 10 of the 13 post-Soviet republics as ‘not free’ in terms of their media.^[4] But it’s not just about censorship and repression. The smarter authoritarians understand the need to repackage official narratives in popular formats. News programmes aim for Western-style production values, and use discussion shows and talking heads. Only the most repressive states, such as Turkmenistan, still favour dreary, Soviet-style propaganda.

Internationally, this mimicry of genre is even more important. States use public relations experts to dress up their government narrative in language that will appeal to a Western audience. The Kazakh government has hired a string of public relations and strategic consultancy companies, including Portland Communications, Tony Blair Associates, BGR Gabara and Media Consulta, to promote its own narrative of economic progress and political stability and downplay criticism of its human rights record and lack of democratic progress.^[5] PR companies place op-eds in leading Western newspapers, lobby parliamentarians and aim to influence government policies. Azerbaijan has also been an active user of Western PR companies, with ARCO, CSM Strategic and Burson Marsteller all reported to have signed contracts with the regime, despite the rapid worsening of government repression against political opponents in recent years.^[6]

One variation on the role of PR companies has been the use of private intelligence companies and legal consultancies. Arcanum, a Zurich-based company controlled by the US holding company RJI Capital Group, is a private intelligence group that employs many former senior intelligence officials as its consultants. According to opposition Kazakh newspapers, citing leaked emails, the Kazakh government employed Arcanum on a multi-million dollar contract as part of its campaign against exiled banker Mukhtyar Ablyazov.^[7] Although it does not name its client, Arcanum outlines this type of contract on its website: ‘Arcanum has been retained in a major political dispute between a sovereign government and its political foes. Arcanum’s investigations have resulted in the tracing of illegal assets worth billions of dollars by one of our clients’ opponents. Arcanum also carried out a public relations and messaging campaign which resulted in front page media placements in major publications around the world. These included the Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, New York Times, Washington Post, RIA-Novosti, Ynet (Israel), Associated Press, Agence France Presse, and Reuters.’^[8]

Although repackaged op-eds do ensure that a government's views are disseminated, they gain more credibility if they can be backed by an independent source, such as a respected civil society or non-governmental organisation. Leaked emails published by the *Le Temps* newspaper in Geneva appear to show a PR campaign proposed to the Kazakh Ministry of Justice, which involved funding an 'independent' report by a European anti-corruption NGO.^[9] The Kazakh government has also funded Western think-tanks and universities. Via the lobbying firm APCO, it funded three reports on Kazakhstan by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. Although CACI insisted that they had full editorial control over the reports, the resulting papers appear likely to have been viewed positively in Astana.^[10]

Kazakhstan has also been active in funding its own civil-society type organisations abroad. Many governments do fund foreign policy research institutes, but reputable think-tanks offer the prospect of research and advocacy that has some independence from government views. For example, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is an independent -think-tank that embraces a plurality of opinions. The Brussels-based Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs (ECFA) may sound similar, but it is a very different beast.^[11] It mimics the form and activity of a think-tank – it publishes papers, hosts workshops and has a board of directors that includes senior European politicians such as former EU External Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner and former UK foreign minister Jack Straw. In reality, however, it is funded by the government of Kazakhstan, and the views and opinions expressed by its representatives hardly differ from the official views of the government in Astana.^[12] The ECFA is just one of many mimicking civil society organisations that appear to have the form of think-tanks and civil society organisations, but are actually acting as conduits for the thinking of post-Soviet authoritarian governments. The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) plays a similar role. Although it appears to be an independent organisation, designed to promote good relations between Azerbaijan and Europe, in practice it is little more than a lobbying organisation, run by PR experts.^[13]

A similar mode of mimicry is at work around elections in post-Soviet autocracies. Legitimate international election monitoring bodies, such as the OSCE's ODIHR, have strongly criticised elections in countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. However, to try to reduce the influence of these critics, authoritarian governments have invited alternative election observers to legitimise their flawed polls. Some of these so called 'zombie monitors' come from the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or similar organizations.^[14] But others are Western politicians or academics, willing to whitewash accounts of elections, however undemocratic the polls may be. Most importantly, it is these voices that are quoted in local media to impress domestic audiences. For example, at parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan in 2015, where official observers from the OSCE/ODIHR team saw 'serious procedural errors and irregularities', observers invited by the government from Britain, Lithuania, Norway, Austria and Bosnia-Herzegovina gave positive accounts of the election at a press conference held even before the polls closed.^[15]

At parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan in November 2015, the OSCE/ODIHR cancelled its monitoring mission after the government imposed restrictions on the number of observers it could deploy. Instead, the regime drafted in its own selection of some 500 'monitors', including foreign businesspeople and parliamentarians with favourable views of the government, and members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE).^[16] The conclusions of these observers were used in the domestic press to legitimise the election.^[17] For example, under the headline, 'UK House of Lords: Azerbaijan ensures transparent parliamentary

election' Azerbaijani media reported praise for the elections from British parliamentarians Lord Evans and Baroness O'Cathain.^[18] Baroness O'Cathain's visit was arranged through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Azerbaijan, with air fares and hotel paid for by the Azerbaijan embassy in London.^[19] Such an arrangement is not unusual: APPGs are useful mechanisms for lobbying; in a number of cases governments have provided administrative support to the groups and organised country visits.^[20] The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) even acts as the secretariat for the APPG on Azerbaijan.^[21]

Even the most authoritarian regimes can find unofficial election observers to boost the government narrative in this way. In Uzbekistan, one of the most repressive states in the world, elections are notoriously undemocratic. The OSCE/ODIHR's report on the 4 December 2016 presidential election concluded that 'The legal framework is not conducive to holding democratic elections' and noted that 'limits on fundamental freedoms undermine political pluralism and led to a campaign devoid of genuine competition.'^[22] However, the Uzbek government invited European politicians to monitor and report positively on the poll.^[23] This has been the pattern at previous elections. Following parliamentary elections in April 2015, British academics and businesspeople who had acted as government-approved 'observers' provided positive accounts of the poll at an Uzbek embassy press conference.^[24]

The information battle has been particularly fraught over events of state violence and repression, such as the killing of hundreds of civilians in Andijan in May 2005. International organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, claimed that Uzbek government forces were involved in a massacre of civilians.^[25] The Uzbek government described the events as an externally-backed terrorist attack, in which those who died were the victims of Islamist terrorists.^[26] A government video of the events was presented at the Carnegie Center in Washington DC. Although the hosts attempted to be even-handed, the summary suggested that 'The film...does not decisively answer whether the use of force, and more specifically its timing was justified'.^[27] This ambivalent conclusion was at odds with the sharp condemnation of the Andijan violence by groups such as Amnesty International, which described the violence as 'a mass killing of civilians'.^[28] More than a decade later, the interpretation of the Andijan events remains contested. While human rights groups continue to call for accountability for the killings more than 10 years after the events, the Uzbek government has rejected any criticism. They have received partial support from sympathetic Western analysts, who have argued that the Andijan incident 'was not a massacre'^[29] and criticised Western media for 'jumping to judgement' against the Uzbek government.^[30] Disputes over the nature of events and the appropriate responses are entirely legitimate. Yet, in cases such as Andijan, authoritarian governments have been able to use accounts by Western academics and analysts to discredit critical accounts of contested events and bolster support for government narratives.

The new battlefield for the modern authoritarian state is digital. Sites such as Facebook or its Russian equivalent Vkontakte are hugely popular across the former Soviet Union. Enthusiasm has waned for the idea of social media as a potentially revolutionary technology, which would challenge authoritarian control over the free flow of information. Although social media allows news and online discussions to circulate relatively freely, authoritarian states have become increasingly sophisticated in their responses. States still use so-called 'first generation' controls, such as blocking websites or closing down access to the Internet:^[31] Azerbaijan has been particularly repressive in its response to bloggers.^[32] But states have increasingly turned to new legislation and the courts to limit digital activism, both domestically and internationally. The Kazakh government attempted to use US courts to attack the opposition *Respublika*

website, after it published leaked emails.^[33] In a series of court cases, Kazakhstan used the US Computer Fraud and Abuse Act to mount a campaign through international courts to close the newspaper's website and harass its editors and contributors. Although Kazakhstan ultimately failed to win the case, the pressure group EFF argued that the US statute was 'deeply flawed' and highlighted the danger that repressive governments may use anti-hacking and computer fraud legislation to suppress legitimate journalism internationally.^[34]

Governments also use social media to track and control individual dissidents or to monitor possible anti-government protests or demonstrations.^[35] In this way, social media offers a highly effective mechanism of mass surveillance. According to a report by Privacy International in 2014, 'Central Asian governments use electronic surveillance technology to spy on activists and journalists in the country, and exiles abroad'. Israeli companies have reportedly provided extensive technological support.^[36] A detailed report by EFF also claimed that the Kazakh authorities may have hacked accounts of political opponents in exile.^[37]

The next step for authoritarian regimes is to use social media as a platform for their own propaganda, using their own social media sites or – more effectively – encouraging independent bloggers and activists to support government policies. Sometimes, they are successful. A tour of popular bloggers in Kazakhstan to the town of Zhanaozen, immediately after 14 protestors were shot dead by police in December 2011, provided support for important parts of the government narrative.^[38] By ensuring that 'independent' bloggers and activists circulate aspects of a government narrative, the message gains more credibility with a wider public. Government officials have even taken to Twitter and Facebook to plug their own policies. Sometimes this digital activism backfires: news reports linked the demotion of former Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Massimov to his over-active use of Twitter.^[39] However, there is a gradual shift from governments simply trying to block social media to finding creative ways of using it to promote their own message and delegitimise opponents.

Conclusion

Post-Soviet states have sometimes rightly complained about biases and gaps in international reporting. However, in most cases, their intervention in the international information space has sought to suppress legitimate criticism, discredit political opponents, and boost their own propaganda. Too often, Western politicians, PR companies, analysts and academics have been only too willing to play along in this discursive game. As some PR professionals have argued, there needs to be far more caution about PR companies working for authoritarian governments.^[40] Western parliamentarians and academics should think twice about becoming involved in election monitoring initiatives outside the agreed channels of the OSCE or signing up to support 'think-tanks' or other organisations funded by authoritarian regimes. Instead, more support should be offered for better media coverage and collaborative academic research on the region, together with genuine debates in civil society to both find common ground in the information battle and to maintain space for more critical views to flourish.

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